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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore the nature of curriculum decision making in early childhood education centers in New South Wales (NSW). Focal questions were: (1) What perceptions did people hold concerning the meanings of curriculum in early childhood centers? (2) Within centers, who participated in the making of the decisions about curriculum? (3) What emphases were placed on parent participation, objectives, activities, evaluation of individual children, and support resources? (4) What curriculum policy documents, if any, from local, regional, and state levels influenced centers? Participating were 20 preschools/day care centers, which were spread across socioeconomic levels and geographically dispersed within two regions. Centers were administered by the Kindergarten Union, the NSW Education Department, or the Department of Family and Community Services. Questionnaires and interviews with the directors of the centers revealed a need for the clarification of the precise meaning of 'curriculum' in all centers and a need for diversity in curriculum approaches. Directors and staff need substantial support in programming, materials development, and staff development activities. Patterns of differences between types of institutions did not emerge as significant except for differences in available planning time and staff autonomy. (RH)

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CURRICULUM DECISION MAKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES IN TWO REGIONS OF NSW, AUSTRALIA

by

WENDY SCHILLER

Submitted to

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT
(0-6 YEARS)

"CHILDHOOD IN THE 21ST CENTURY"

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School-based curriculum decision making exists when the locus of power and control for decisions about curriculum lies within the school and the community.

(Cohen 1985: 1157)

What is the situation in Australian preschools? To what extent do they have curriculum autonomy? To what extent do they conform to centralised curricula?

In one of the few research studies concerning preschool curriculum, Harrison (1982) explored the relationship between the intended and the operational curriculum in six early childhood education centres in Adelaide, South Australia. Using a participant-observation approach, she concluded that the director of each early childhood centre was the major curriculum decision-maker and that "implementing a curriculum plan was a complex interactive process" (Harrison, 1982: 4).

Purpose of the Study

In an effort to explore the nature of curriculum decision-making in early childhood education centres, a study was initiated in New South Wales focussed upon the following questions:

(a) what perceptions did people hold concerning the meanings of curriculum in early childhood centres?

(b) within early childhood centres, who participated in the making of the decisions about curriculum?

(c) what emphases were placed on parent participation, objectives, activities, evaluation of individual children and support resources?

(d) what curriculum policy documents, if any, from local, regional and state levels were having any influence upon early childhood centres?

Methodology

The sample selected for the study were 13 preschools/day care centres in the Hunter Region of New South Wales (NSW) and 7 preschools/daycare centres in the Central Coast Region of NSW. They were spread across socio-economic levels and geographically dispersed throughout the regions considered. The centres were administered by one of the following:

Kindergarten Union
Education Department of NSW, or
Department of Family and Community Services (FACS)

and so offered a fair representation of the sponsoring agencies for early childhood centres in NSW.

A questionnaire was developed and piloted in Newcastle and then mailed to the Directors of the twenty early childhood centres in the two selected regions. Copies were also distributed to the sponsoring agencies and permission sought to conduct the study. Within 5 days of mailing, the author set up appointments at each centre to interview respondents as they completed the survey form, in order to facilitate interactive responses and clarification of any confusing questions. Telephone interviews were set up for the Central Coast Region. Although time consuming, this method ensured 100% response rate to the questionnaire and provided richer data than would have been possible with a highly structured, readily codeable response format to a questionnaire. The methods used provided quantitative data, detailed responses to questions asked and additional comments from respondents.

Findings

In the Hunter Region (Region 1), directors of early childhood centres had held their current positions for an average of 4.6 years, in the Central Coast (Region 2) 8.5 years was the average. In Region 1 the directors had an average of 9 years teaching experience, in Region 2 the average was 4.5 years of teaching. In both regions the average attendance of children was 45 per day and 125 per week, with ages varying from 0-5 years depending on the type and size of the centre. Similarly, directors' responsibilities varied from centre to centre, depending on the size of the centre, the type of services offered and the hours of operation.

All respondents demonstrated that they understood curriculum to be "a program", but there were many variations on interpretation after this. Several added that the curriculum included "all events of the day" or "a course of study in a given time with aims and objectives", or "a philosophy and approach to children". Others saw the curriculum as "anything really that was of developmental value and interest to a child", whereas some narrowed curriculum to mean "daily and weekly planning". In very few centres were parents seen as part of curriculum planning.

Curriculum Decision Making Policies

No centre had a written policy statement on curriculum. Two respondents were uncertain whether their centre had a policy, twelve indicated that the centre's policy was informal (not written) and 5 said that their centre had no policy at all. One respondent indicated that their centre's policy was being changed with advice from FACS Department at the time of the study. A key concern of the study was to explore who was involved in the development of curriculum policy, planning, practice and evaluation at each centre. All 20 directors indicated that they were responsible for policy. Five directors determined the policy unilaterally, 10 directors included other staff members in the process, 2 directors

included a parent education advisory committee, and 1 director included the management committee in determining policy for curriculum. 19 of the 20 respondents indicated that they had complete autonomy and there were no significant regional or state level influences in developing individual centre policies. One centre cited strong opposition to their curriculum and policy by FACS Department resulting in dramatic changes for staff, parents and children of that centre at the time of interview.

Curriculum Implementation

In 18 of the 20 centres there was a high degree of staff interaction in the short-term curriculum implementation through ad hoc meetings, team teaching, group planning and supervision and carrying out of activities with various children during the day. This generally occurred on a daily or weekly basis. Long term planning, where it occurred, was on a fortnightly, or even monthly basis and discussed at formal staff meetings. All 20 respondents saw the curriculum at their centres as being based on the needs and expressed interests of individual children (sometimes called "focus" children), and at six centres special themes were used as foci/resources by the staff. An orientation towards school-based learning was considered important by seven centres but not as important in the remaining thirteen centres. Most respondents used a combination of child interests, skill-based checklists, child observations and themes in centre-based curriculum planning.

In contrast to recent studies in primary and secondary schools, timetabling was not seen as a constraint to curriculum planning in early childhood centres. Rather, the timetable was seen to be a safeguard in providing a certain amount of individualized instruction for "special needs" children because of a subsidised-funding requirement by the sponsoring agencies.

Curriculum Objectives

Personal philosophies and priorities of staff determined curriculum decisions at 6 centres, needs of individual children were seen as being paramount by 9 directors and 5 respondents saw curriculum objectives as being the responsibility of the individual teacher. Implementation of objectives appeared to be "haphazard", "ad hoc between staff" based on "free play and teacher-directed activities" or "weekly assessment of needs". No real consensus was evident in implementation of objectives.

Curriculum Evaluation

In obtaining feedback about effectiveness of curricula, 15 directors obtained feedback from staff at weekly meetings but informal sources of feedback also included parents voluntary, verbal responses, children's participation rates, staff observations, reaction to newsletters and children's comments or emerging interests. Only one centre had conducted a parent survey to elicit feedback on curriculum effectiveness.

Licensing authorities in NSW require from directors, regular formal reporting of evaluation at monthly management meetings.so formal evaluations of curricula by directors were based on individual checklists, anecdotal records, sample folders of work, parent conferences and staff evaluations of childrens' interaction and activities. Comer (1986:16) had commented that where teachers are involved in cumulative assessments of curricula there is a direct feed forward effect for curriculum planning in centres and this was true in the centres where staff were playing an integral part in evaluation.

Parent Involvement

The extent and nature of parent involvement in all centres was extremely limited. Parents and community were generally informed or advised about curriculum activities,but their input was peripheral to curriculum planning and implementation. Strategies used by centres to advise parents were noticeboards, newsletters and informal discussions as parents "collected their children". Direct parent participation was limited, however, to assisting with excursions, helping with food preparation, helping with newsletter production or participating in management committees. In 7 centres were was no parent participation even though parents were said to be willing to participate if invited.

Centre developed documents

Only 3 centres maintained a prospectus available for parents and interested community members. 11 centres published newsletters 3 to 5 times per year as a way of disseminating information. Two centres had photo albums and others listed their own resource files and posters about the value of play, and newspaper clippings as being available. Hence there was a distinct **lack** of information available for interested parents or community members about each centre.

Support services available to assist with curriculum planning

Services offered for school-based curriculum development in general are either available through a network of consultants or advisors (human resources) or through the existence of guidelines and documents offered by authorities (physical resources). For the early childhood centres in the present study, little support was available to them to assist with their curriculum planning. In fact, most centres reported nothing being available either in the form of human resources or physical resources. Exceptions were provided through the activities of the Australian Early Childhood Association which distributes **Resource Booklets** as well as the **Australian Journal of Early Childhood.**

Other available support services listed by respondents included: Education Department and Kindergarten Union Advisors (Sydney based); Regional Department of Family and Community Services Advisors; Regional inservice programs, special education staff and early childhood conferences, libraries, hospitals, community workers, college students.

Several of the respondents who were desperate for help, mentioned the need for a curriculum resources library, curriculum consultants, and centre exchange visits for staff to stimulate interaction and support for their curriculum activities.

Reactions to involvement of the early childhood centre in curriculum decision-making

As in the literature of curriculum decision-making generally, staff responses to questions about the extent of their involvement in curriculum decision-making, ranged through the whole spectrum from "great", to "lack of desire for involvement in curriculum decision-making".

Comments indicating need for improved support included the following:

> "There's a need for curriculum policy guidelines at the state level, keeping in mind planning for the community at the local level".
>
> "Definitely we need our own resource library at a teachers' centre".
>
> "Time to plan is the big problem in long day care, so content and decisions must be left to the staff and **autonomy is vital**".
>
> "It's a trust system, which is not working".

Discussion and Conclusion

There was evidence of the need for clarification of the precise meaning of "curriculum" in all centres studied and a need for diversity in curriculum approaches. Directors and staff obviously need substantial support in programming and development of materials as well as staff development provisions including workshops, conferences, exchange visits to centres and regular regional meetings through a planned program of inservice as evidenced by the following comments:

- there's a feeling of inadequacy about the job. You don't know what others can and can't do in their centres;
- there's not enough checking done by supervisors or parents;
- I would like to see other centres and discuss how they operate, use short/long term observations, record-keeping techniques, etc;
- there's a need for a wide variety of people to be involved from within and outside the centre and more time and support from staff development and inservice.

Patterns of differences between types of institutions (eg daycare/preschool) did not emerge as significant apart from the following:

- Daycare centre personnel have less time for planning and Education Department staff have the most generous planning allocations;
- Community centre staff have the more autonomy in their centres than Kindergarten Union staff and Education Department staff because the latter two are more centrally administered and staffed;

- Education Department preschools have more material resources and inservice provision for staff during work time; and
- Community-based centres administered by FACS were required to have community management committees to whom staff were responsible for curriculum evaluation.

This does not imply negligence on the part of staff as all respondents appeared to be conscientious, and cooperative, but time constraints were obvious in all centres studied, so more direct support is needed to manage time effectively and look at pressure points for staff. This affects the role of the advisor to the centre who is usually "stretched very thin" in terms of available time per centre in a region.

Recommendations

The following represent an amalgam of the findings from the survey, ethnographic studies and long-term experience of the author, but there exist crucial and widespread deficiencies in the provisions for early childhood education. These inadequacies occur both for the human resources and curriculum aspects of early childhood education. The needs are extensive, complex and interactive. What is required is a major restructuring to promote:

1. more relevant, accessible and adaptable curriculum resources to support such personalised approaches as are needed to cater for the spontaneously-emerging interests of children;
2. more effective support networks and relief time for teachers in long day-care situations to provide them with preparation time similar to that already enjoyed by other groups of early childhood professionals;
3. more opportunities for professional development through the extension of consultancy support, establishment of early childhood

centre networks for exchange of ideas and materials, and the provision of a range of inservice programs geared to the differing needs of beginning teachers and administrators. Such provisions would assist in overcoming the high levels of isolation which adversely affect personnel in early childhood centres;

4. more involvement in the processes of curriculum decision-making in each centre to develop an explicit rationale for activities which can be clearly communicated between directors, teachers, aides and parents;

5. more extensive documentation both of curriculum planning and of planning for, and progress of individual children;

6. more encouragement of curriculum diversity as reflected in different emphases in different early childhood centres, and reflecting the changing interests of the particular group of children at each centre;

7. greater encouragement in attaining high levels of communication, cohesion, and co-operation within and between staffs of early childhood centres, parents and children;

8. the development of policy guidelines in each state and territory of Australia;

9. a system of recognition of excellence in early childhood centres to be developed by the Australian Early Childhood Association, possible derived from that recently developed by the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the United States of America.

10. increased levels of communication generated through conferences at the local, regional, state levels, and through further publications developed specifically to circulate practical curriculum ideas at the local level.

In terms of early childhood centres' public accountability and effectiveness, it is imperative for the future of young children in Australia that steps be taken to implement these recommendations and that more support be given by sponsoring bodies to reduce the isolation felt particularly in country regions of NSW, Australia.

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